



the
belle
from Gaza

A FILM BY
**YOLANDE
ZAUBERMAN**



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
SPECIAL SCREENING

UNITE AND PHOBICS
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YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN

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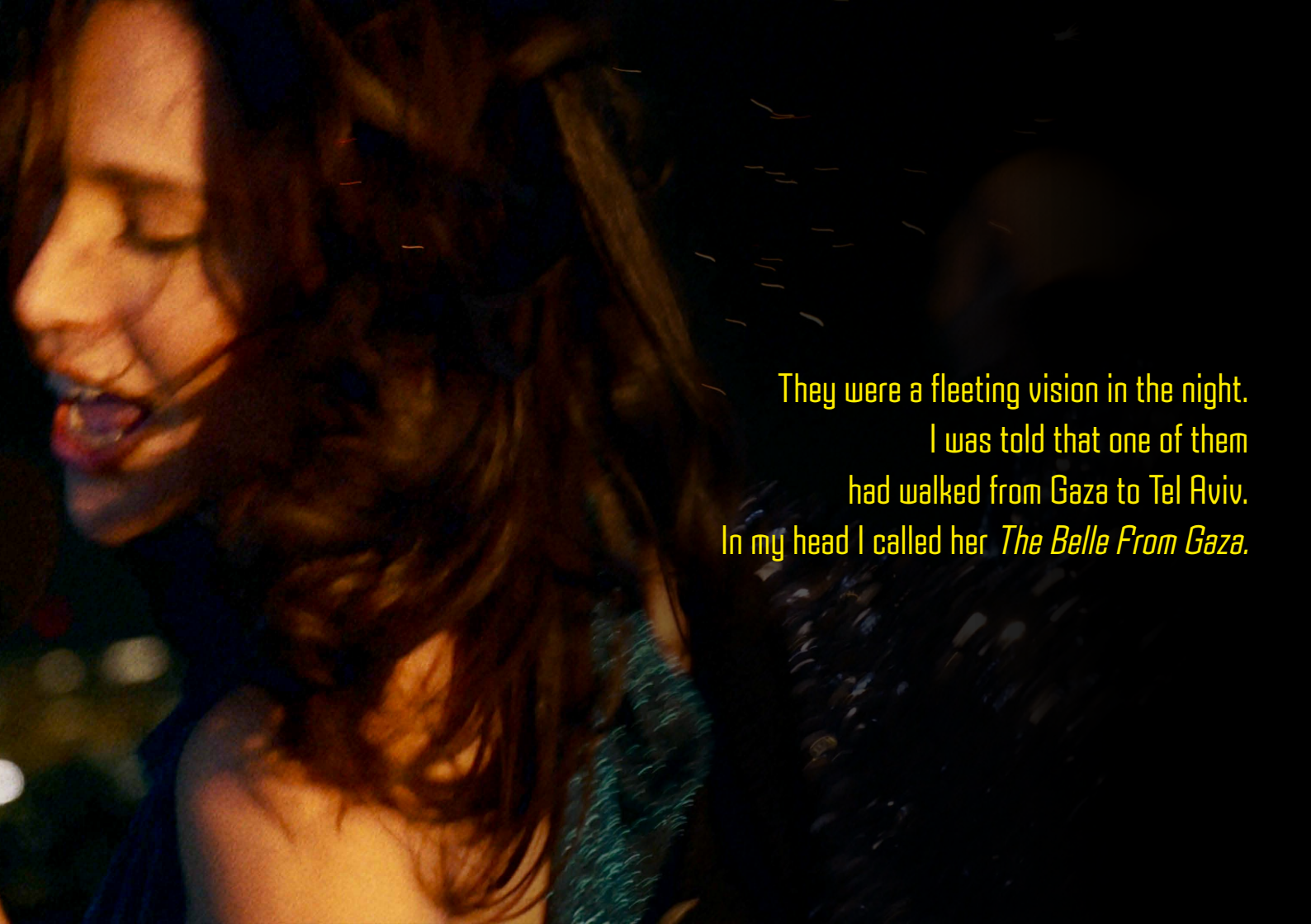
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They were a fleeting vision in the night.
I was told that one of them
had walked from Gaza to Tel Aviv.
In my head I called her *The Belle From Gaza*.

conversation between Alice Diop and Yolande Zauberman

Paris, January 2024

ALICE DIOP Our friendship and artistic partnership mean the world to me. Watching your film allows me to make headway in my own practice and to clear certain grey areas. Your process is like no other. To think about your films is to think about contemporary cinema. Few films give a filmmaker so much food for thought. When you mention a new project, I never know what to expect. I can never picture what your films are going to be like before I see them. You probably need these projects to remain unformulated before you shoot them. Discovering your films is a stunning experience. You spend two years working on a project that are unfathomable to me, and when I go to the screening, I am amazed by what I see, which conjures up exactly the questions that concern us, as filmmakers and as citizens. What astounds me is that you have found the only place that you could possibly inhabit right now, the only place to acknowledge how you care about this torn-up territory - this street, with these women.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN If I remain secretive while I am shooting a film, it is probably because I proceed instinctively. I don't even share much with the people I work with. But deep down, I know what I'm looking for and, as in love, I have a feeling that if I formulate things, they will disappear

into thin air. I always start by stammering out the type of questions a baby would ask if it could speak. I look for the only spot where I can place myself. For me, filming is an act of love. It is also a dance. It is the meeting point between something very old, certain obsessions, and something that is improvised and whose rhythm you must follow. Not long ago I read a text on Spinoza saying that to him we are all made of mud, and in this mud, there is light – a true idea that is like a miracle in itself. He does not believe in the strong or the weak, but only in the person who follows this true idea.

ALICE DIOP Do you realise that it is a pattern in your work? All your films link the mud and the sun. In *The Belle from Gaza*, you find a place where people can heal, and where shattered bodies meet the light. In *Would You Have Sex with an Arab?*, or in *M*, by asking questions that need to be asked, you relieve some of the tension between the violence of an impossibility and the promise of an encounter.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN The difference between night and darkness is that at night, there are still lights. In *The Belle From Gaza*, as in the other two films in this night trilogy, I seek the light to push back the darkness. Where can we still find the light? In the face of a loved one, or in the faces of these women who have deeply moved me.

ALICE DIOP How did you end up there, in this street?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN These three films are like Russian dolls. One night, when I was shooting *M*, I was in a car with Menahem. Suddenly, we saw a gorgeous trans woman in the street. Menahem rushed out of the car and ran towards her. But she ran away. He came back and said to the camera: "My parents don't want me, my children don't want me, trans women don't want me!" In order to include this scene, I wanted to film a trans woman running away with her back to the camera. I found one with two other girls, all of them Arab, on Hatnufa Street, which was to become the main setting for *The Belle From Gaza*. They agreed to run for me. Once back in Paris, my

partner Sélim Nassib, who did the sound for the film and who speaks Arabic, mentioned that one of these girls had told him that she had walked from Gaza to Tel Aviv. I had to find her! Every time I had the chance to go back there, I looked for this *Belle From Gaza*. This quest became the backbone of the film. It was well before October 7 and Gaza already seemed to me like hell on earth, a prison with impenetrable gates. Besides, it is also where the story of Samson and Delilah takes place.

ALICE DIOP What is the connection between this story and your film?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN Samson is Jewish and he is the lover of Delilah who is a Philistine – the ancient name for the Palestinians. His hair is as long as a woman's, and it makes him the strongest man in the world. His secret: never cut his hair. After a night of passion, Delilah manages to make him confess where his strength comes from and, while he sleeps, she cuts his hair. The Philistines capture Samson and tie him to the pillars of the temple. He asks God to give him back his strength, if only for a moment, and God grants it. Then Samson pulls on the ropes that bound him, which brings the temple down on the Philistines and himself. This story left a lasting impression on me as a child. When I learned that, according to the Bible, it had happened in Gaza, I thought that this city should be looked after. This story is about a collective suicide. I have always found it heartbreaking. For me, *The Belle From Gaza* stems from this myth.

ALICE DIOP This is why your films are so unexpectedly political. You are searching for a Palestinian trans woman who left Gaza on foot to go to Israel. Your quest makes your film political in a way that destabilises the very foundations of our representations of this territory, these people and this conflict. Everything gets summed up in this search.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN Something behind my back pushed me to make each of these three films. Before making films, I was quite paralysed, somewhat cowardly. The camera put me back on my feet. To my great surprise, my

body was put in motion. I have the impression that we filmmakers are like diviners searching around with their dowsing rods...

ALICE DIOP I am not sure that you could explain rationally why you are on this street, but nobody else could do it, carry out this investigation, look at these women, film them, welcome them, be welcomed by them, and perhaps heal their wounds a little.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN I saw Wim Wenders' film on Anselm Kiefer, who said: "Myths explain history more than any form of rationality." I believe that. I don't even try to think rationally about what I do. I make mirror-films that look at us. With a camera, you see things even more clearly. If you stand straight, at the right place, a miraculous dance invents itself.

ALICE DIOP Can you explain why it is so important to you to stand at the junction, on the fault line?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN Because it is the only place I can be! I am drawn to this rift; I feel like I'm on the crest of a wave or on a tightrope. I am afraid of heights, and I know that I could fall at any moment. But I don't know how to be anywhere else, I can't even see anything if I'm somewhere else. My heart is only open in these places – and I only see with my heart.

ALICE DIOP Is it because in fractured places such as these, a connection is still possible?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN Somehow there is within me this slightly petrified young girl who wondered how to fix the world, how to act in the face of what you don't understand. And I think that deep down, I am still that girl in a way. When I was in South Africa, I realised that I needed to write a story about the pleasure of the Other – which too many people cut themselves off from without even knowing it. I need the Other. The Other wakes me up. Without it and without cinema as a window on the world, I would be dead.



ALICE DIOP That's the beauty of it. Listening to you, even though your three films have different subjects, it seems like you are looking for the same thing. I tend to always analyse everything, yet I don't want you to spell out your intentions, I'd rather hear about your obsessions, your process, your need to be in these specific places. At the beginning of *The Belle From Gaza*, a trans Jewish woman, Israela, tells of the beautiful love affair she had with a rabbi. She talks about nightlife, about the moment she fell in love. There is the whole question of singularity here, shaking up representations that are often commonplaces.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN All these women want is to become themselves. That's what we all want. They have an amazing understanding of life.

ALICE DIOP Their depth of analysis is striking. How did you choose each other? Because to make such a film, both sides need to welcome each other.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN I had already filmed Talleen in *M*, and Israela is Talleen's agent. When I shot *M*, Israela told me that she was married to a rabbi in Bnei Brak, an orthodox Jewish town, where Manahem also lived. She transitioned when she was eighteen. She started chatting with this rabbi on Facebook, and eventually they got married. He never realised she was trans. Until the day she asked for a divorce. As for Danièle and Nathalie, they are the women I filmed in the street when I was shooting *M*. I met Nadine - the girl who sings the sura at the end of the film - before she transitioned. I was already captivated and fascinated by her, but I wasn't allowed to film her. Then a month later, Nadine called me back...

ALICE DIOP But why did they accept to play along with your film? Did you explain to them what you were looking for?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN I was looking for the *Belle From Gaza*. They could feel that our meetings were important to me. I also think that being looked at in this way became precious for them, as it was for me. But nothing is stated.

I don't explain anything. We are in this dance together.

ALICE DIOP How long do you film for?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN I made these films in several stages. I didn't stay long. Because it could cause problems in some places. It was very intense. These women also used me, the project became a part of their personal journeys. They were all transforming themselves, and being filmed over a long period of time pertained to this process. They introduced me to extraordinary things. And as I arrived with absolutely no knowledge at all, they explained everything to me. I worked with a very small team. My boyfriend, my friends. I filmed the intimacy of these women from my own intimacy. There is nothing professional about my approach.

ALICE DIOP We can feel it in the way you film them, the way you look at them: in these three films everything is so... you. It seems obvious that you couldn't have delegated this gaze to a cameraman, for instance. I also think that the film must stay in that nebulous place, because it is an experience we must live for ourselves. However, there is one amazing scene that sticks in my mind: when Nathalie, a few days after her operation, wears a hijab, becomes religious and recites Surah Al-Fatiha. This scene is breathtakingly beautiful but also really scary, because it exposes the film to potential attacks. Are you aware of this?

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN Nathalie has dreadful nightmares, she becomes religious, but she does not regret her transition for a second. I don't think this scene inspires fear. It inspires emotion. When I made *M*, a lot of people were scared for me, but I wasn't. What could be shocking about all this? I really don't understand it.

ALICE DIOP Basically, the film as a whole could be considered shocking, because it is set in an unidentified, deeply political place that challenges all the representations we might have.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN This film, like all the others I have made, is aimed at individuals, and individuals only. I know that some things may be dangerous, but in this case, it doesn't feel that way. When I went to South Africa, they had just passed a law that could have people who are caught with a camera in their hands sentenced to sixteen years in prison. I would never have decided to go if I had known about this law. It so happened that I was already on my way when it was passed. Similarly, I wouldn't have made *The Belle From Gaza* if the October 7 attack had already happened. I shot it beforehand, and it resulted in this film.

ALICE DIOP I watched *The Belle From Gaza* before October 7, I watched it again shortly afterwards, and I found solace in it. The crazy thing is that your film is permeated by what is happening in Gaza without ever referring to it. The women never talk about Gaza. Yet the question, right down to the title, runs through the whole film implicitly.

YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN It is at the core of the film because it is the impossible place. Gaza is the unthinkable. A girl made the journey from the unthinkable to us. I spoke to her without knowing who she was, then I went looking for her.





Yolande Zauberger

Born in Paris, Yolande Zauberger was introduced to cinema by director Amos Gitai. In 1987, she made her first documentary, *Classified People*, about apartheid in South Africa, which won numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the Paris Film Festival. In 1989, *Caste Criminelle*, shot in India, was selected for the Cannes Film Festival. Three years later, she directed her first fiction film in Yiddish, *Me Ivan, You Abraham*, which won several international awards, including the Youth Award at the Cannes Film Festival. This was followed by a documentary trilogy set in the Israeli night: *Would you have sex with an Arab?* (Venice Film Festival 2011); *M* (awarded worldwide, César for Best Documentary 2020); and finally *The Belle From Gaza*.



with

TALLEEN ABU HANNA, ISRAELA, NADINE, DANIELLE, NATHALIE



CREW

Director, screenplay, image

1st Assistant Director

1st Assistant Operator

Sound

Editing

Sound Editing

Mix

Postproduction Manager

Produced by

Associate producers

A production

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